



With the technology advancements inherent in the Interoperability Montana Project, the reinforcement of existing relationships and the development of new ones, public safety in Montana has taken a major leap forward.

Incidents happen at the local/tribal level and it is the responsibility of local/tribal jurisdictions to respond to and manage those incidents. Local/tribal emergency managers are tasked with coordination of the plans, policies, procedures and resources needed to respond to those incidents. In addition, they are responsible, in large part, for the coordination and/or development of annual exercises to test local capabilities.

In most incidents and exercises, one issue, nearly always identified as needing improvement, is communication. In some cases, the issue is the ability to communicate with response agencies from within your jurisdiction. For example, one agency may use a UHF or 800 MHz system, while other agencies in that same jurisdiction use a VHF system. This is the same issue that resulted in the deaths of so many firemen during the September 11th attacks. In other instances, the issue is the ability to communicate with agencies from outside your jurisdiction – local, tribal, state or federal.

As identified in the National Strategy for Homeland Security, the challenge in securing the nation from terrorist attacks is to develop interconnected and complementary systems that are reinforcing rather than duplicative and that ensure essential requirements are met. Because of their coordination responsibilities, local/tribal emergency managers became the point of contact for the Homeland Security Assessment and Strategy Program. This program was designed to assess threats, vulnerabilities, capabilities, and needs related to preparedness for weapons of mass destruction terrorism incidents at the state, tribal and local levels.

Initially, grant funding from the Department of Homeland Security was allocated by the State Administering Agency (SAA) to the counties/tribes. The local jurisdiction could then decide how this funding would enhance local/tribal capabilities in response to a terrorism incident, within the parameters identified by the grant. Many local/tribal jurisdictions began the process of upgrading radios and related equipment with this funding. Concept Demonstration Projects I (Lewis & Clark County) and II (Northern Tier) came into being as grassroots interoperability communication

projects designed not only to improve communications locally, but also to develop an interconnected system.

With the success of these projects, counties/ tribes formed into nine consortia, with the intent of developing a statewide interoperable communications network. Grant funding was allocated to support the consortium rather than individual counties and tribes. County/tribal leadership appointed a primary and an alternate representative to serve as consortium members. The consortium members then elected a project director as the chief executive officer of the consortium, responsible for day-to-day operations and to provide coordination between the nine Consortia, SAA, Project Directors Board, Department of Administration and the contractors engaged in the design, management, and deployment of the project.

Emergency managers are working diligently at making this project a success. Four of the nine project directors and many of the Consortia Board members are emergency managers. In the Central Montana Consortium, for instance, the primary or alternate board member for the seven jurisdictions is the emergency manager. Others serve as members of the Interoperability Montana Technical Committee, while others provide support to the project by helping coordinate and gather local information needed for the statewide project.

Grant funding is now allocated for the project, rather than the consortia. These changes – local jurisdiction to consortia to the project – have brought about a major change in the mindset we have all used for many years. Rather than thinking of our own needs, or the needs of the individual consortia, we have made the leap to thinking in more global terms.

We have learned that in order to receive, we have to give. We have developed relationships not only with the members of our individual consortium but also with those of

other consortia and with state agencies. We have developed relationships with several federal agencies and will continue to expand both the federal and state groups as the project expands. We are in the process of building relationships with states contiguous to Montana as well as Canadian provinces.

Interoperability refers to the ability of public safety emergency responders to work seamlessly without any special effort. Wireless communications interoperability specifically refers to the ability of public safety officials to share information via voice and data signals on demand, in real time and when needed. Communications interoperability also makes it possible for public safety agencies responding to catastrophic accidents or disasters to work effectively together. It allows public safety personnel to maximize resources in planning for major predictable events or for disaster response and recovery efforts. With the technology advancements inherent in the Interoperability Montana Project, the reinforcement of existing relationships and the development of new ones, public safety in Montana has taken a major leap forward.

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